

# The Iron Lord

By S. R. Crockett

AUTHOR OF "THE STICKIT KIBBER," "THE RAIDERS," "THE WHITE PLUME," Etc.

## CHAPTER IV.

### A Man at War with His Maker.

One of Vida Bryan's best friends, after Dick Finnan and the red-nosed Irishman on the Skerry Light, was old Abraham Fyfe, the senior gardener at Gorm House. Mr. Fyfe refused to have a head gardener, or, indeed, a "head" anything.

"I am head gardener," he would say; "head cook, head bottle-washer, head everything! There is no head at Gorm House or in the Kirktown pits but Jacob Romer. So mind you that!"

Still, Abraham was a man with the best pay, the longest service, the most privilege, and the only man about the place who at times dared to speak his mind to his master. Jacob Romer knew sincerity when he saw it. For instance, he was as well aware that James Kahn was busy feathering his nest as that Abraham Fyfe was serving him like a leal man and no hireling. But then his business was such that James Kahn was more useful to him. Any man may be a good man, but it takes a clever man to be a servicable rascal. Besides, a man of conscience and scruples is just so much more hampered.

But still Abraham had a tolerance and a respect from the ironmaster which were withheld from his cleverer tool. The latter was "Kahn" always to his master. But the gardener was always "Abraham," and the three master of Gorm House would sometimes end a discussion as to horticultural subjects with the admission that "After all, Abraham, perhaps you may know more than myself—about shalots!"

Vida liked well enough to see Abraham "silly down," as he said, "frae the big house to help her tidy up a wee!" It made her feel less lonesome down by the little gate cottage at the glebe end. This was not the main lodge of Gorm House, but one of which the gate always stood open, which led, by a narrower, longer, and more sequestered avenue, under a gloomy, almost secret archway of green, with a couch of pine-needles, restful and elastic enough, to the stable entrance. But still Jacob Romer passed out much more frequently by the open glebe end gate than by the guarded by the huge tortured sarranians which represented the heraldic supporters of his uncle's family.

"See to that noo! He never so muckle as looks the road ye are on, my bonnie!" said old Abraham, who had his privileges with Vida, as he pointed after the smoking wheels of his master's carriage, "na, na! His heart is over hard, even as the nether millstone. There is ay something for the grace o' God to work on, in a sinner who errs through the glamour o' a weel-favored face. That was King David himself, ye ken. But Jacob Romer, never—I have kennaed him—ay, for forty year, and wae for self and siller, that heart in his breast has never donned the faster."

Vida turned pale as she stood listening. Perhaps she was destined to hear from this stranger that which her mother had so carefully hidden.

"Did he never love any woman?" said Vida, tremulously, slowly crumbling the leaves of a blond tea-rose between her fingers.

"Save us, lass!" cried the old man, snatching the branch from her. "dinna gae spoiling the best bloom o' the 'Pride o' Burgundy' that my ain hands planted for ye—ay—they did so—grafted on Ayrshire white it was, an' dug about an' watered—but what was it ye were sayin'? Ow, say, about the Maister. Was he ever in love? Love—love—love to ye! Is there naething else 'f the heads o' ye young folk—but havers about love?"

"But, Mr. Romer—you were going to tell me—"

"Was I? I hadna mind that I mentioned it. Howsever—ye will maybe nae hear tell that the maister was married—when he was a younger man. It was doon Northumberland way, where there are bonny bits o' lasses—white 'er delicate as bakers' biscuits, wi' pink sugar on the tip. Ay, I served wi' the said man then—the first Maister Jacob Gorm, ye will have heard tell o' him. He was a great man in Thorshy, what they call chairman the best doon an' the best o' ships. Him it was that sunk the first o' the Incubus pits and set up the Company. It was coal he was seekin', but Jacob Romer fand the iron as weel—that has been the make o' the coal-side in a wae loom at it an' it may be the perdition o' it at it!"

"But the young maister—he, he took a strange notion into his head as he said, 'Abraham,' he says to me, 'I am to be married. A maid—ye'll have heard tell o' her and his head except when he has a wife and family to support. So they say, I am going to try it!'"

"Good luck to you and your bonnie lass, says."

"But mind, nothing must be said about it to—"

He cocked his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of his uncle, I added, to let him ken that I was a there, as the sayin' is, an' that he hadna feared o' Abraham Fyfe opening his wee mouth when he had need to keep it shut!

Weel, I saw the lass married, for I shut the kirk. It was in an Episcopal kirk in England—nabody but themselves two an' the headie-centur to gle the bairn young thing awa'! Me? I was safe hid in the gallery. Nabody kennaed that I was there to see. But somehow the marriage dinn answer, Never did Jacob Romer dare to whisper a word to his uncle, for fear that the old bachelor thief wad dishnerit him. An' after that Jacob Gorm was in his grave, it was not a whit better. The wife gae wrang 'er mind, or deo'd o' something. An' say it may be w' reason that Jacob Romer gane by the glebe yett w' his horses ay at speed, an' a face on him like death an' hell following after!"

"Yes, perhaps he has need!" said Vida, in a low voice.

as a good Cameronian, he had officiated his doctrine as to Elect and non-Elect infants, as a private person Abraham thought of heaven as a place where lasses and luddies played at marbles and ball upon golden streets.

"For," said he, in explanation of this, "it's natural that the young lightsoes things wad whies he trin' o' the eternal harpin' an' singin'!"

"He was true to his wife, then?" Vida went on with an accent which might have put Abraham Fyfe on his guard, save for the fact that he had his deaf ear toward her at the moment.

"Crueel-weel, no' exactly," said the ancient gardener of Gorm House. "Ye see, he was just a man that should never have been married. Of such there are two kinds—tak ye tenn, lassock, o' what I am sayin': There are them that canna settle to any woman, an' them that canna settle to any ex woman. Jacob Romer was o' the first sort. After a month, his wife was nae mair to him than a coat that ditta fit. A' that he thoct about was just how to get rid o' her."

A man for whom the ironmaster's wife was a better already," said Vida, snatching desperately at her self-control. "I was only sorry for the poor wife that died without ever being loved."

"If ye kennaed Jacob Romer as weel as I do, ye wadna grieve for her," said Abraham Fyfe. "Sure am I that bath the mither an' ba'ra will be leavin' an' skippin' like two bonnie young lasses on the mountains o' Beaulah—just to be rid o' Jacob Romer an' Jacob Romer's temper!"

"And why, then, do you serve such a man?" asked Vida, looking at the sober face of the old Cameronian, momentarily lighted up with a flash of somber fire.

"Deed, then, my bonnie, it is because Abraham cannae do dother. Ye see, I am a better already," said Vida, snatching desperately at her self-control. "I was only sorry for the poor wife that died without ever being loved."

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not. What should I do with myself? I am a man without hobbies—I have never gone in for their confounded scientific nonsense—cutting up dogs and frogs and swearing the brutes like it. I have had no time for golf, or to fish, or to shoot. I have only attended to my patients and to my Thorshy appointments. These have taken all my time. Even when I went off ten days in the summer time, I was precious glad to get back again to the round."

Jacob Romer nodded appreciatively. "Rare thing, work," he grunted, "only thing worth livin' for! Give you my time to think how miserable you are!"

"But I have not been miserable," objected Dr. Tom. "I have liked my work well enough, and done it well. But now younger men are taking my place—passing me by. Yes, it is true, I am getting old. I do not take easily to newer and cheaper methods. There is that young Salveson, now—ah, it angers me only to think of him—"

"What has he done?" asked Jacob. "It concerns you also, in some degree," said his brother. "We will go into that night. But just now—I think I'll be down a little before bed."

"Nonsense!" cried Jacob. "He down, indeed! Stretch your legs, you mean, as far as No. 2 pit, and see Kahn. I have to speak to him anyway."

So the brothers went out, still amicable and united, as, indeed, was the fact, for it was their first night together—at all events respecting the coal mine. The similarity of their characters, and the knowledge that, though each might "do" the work at large, neither could impose on the other. Nor, indeed, would they have dreamt of making the attempt.

Blood and the blood of other kindred had made Jacob and Thomas Romer very like one another. But while Thomas had the sleek, well-fed look of one who has always hunted with the pack and dwelt in ease, Jacob, with his coal mine, seemed even to the quick, suspicious turn of head, the half-bared tooth, the ready snap, while through his youth he had underlain the vigorous brutalities of his uncle Gorm of Ingormach, whose heir he had become. The doctor had only loved his profession with regularity and success, his practice enlarging almost automatically with the growth of an enterprising northern seaport.

The brothers, two alert, active men for their ages, both of a height, and carrying themselves with a certain swing of consanguinity, took the road to the Glebe End Gate.

Wringing in himself, bearing the destiny of his brother's life, and continually striking out and rejecting schemes, Jacob Romer was not given to regarding either the persons or the things about him—until, that is, he had his work under his hand. Thomas, on the contrary, accustomed to draw his conclusions and perfect his diagnoses by observations of all sorts, had his eyes everywhere.

He walked a little behind his brother, but a pace, perhaps, while Jacob threw himself forward, and the two, as they moved, each toward the path, they rode on, while Dr. Tom counted the pheasants which his brother reared and preserved with such scornful care against the day when he called them to his principal customers and their buyers. The two gentlemen might have the pleasure of slaughtering them.

He noted that the road was seldom traveled save by some single light-running vehicle, his brother's mail-coach, as he judged.

Then quite unexpectedly they came upon a lodge gate, with a brilliant show of rhododendron beds and a promise of many clambering roses to come later in the year.

"You have a beautiful place here, Jacob," said the doctor, pausing to look at it.

"Beautiful!" the owner threw the word at him like a bomb at a dog. "Is it?" he had not noticed. I know it is the nearest way to pit No. 2. Also the quietest. No one to spy on your comings and goings."

"Quiet enough, certainly," agreed his brother. "And the view is lovely. The sight of the slight, vivid figure of a girl, with eyes like the dusk of pansies, who watched them from the porch of a wayside cottage. 'Why, man,' he added, 'there is a girl whom most men would be glad to have spy upon their comings and goings!'"

Jacob Romer turned about angrily, took in Vida with one sharp glance, and strode on impatiently.

"Tom," he said, "you always were a fool. Now you are becoming a dotard. This is the daughter of one of my work people, to whom Kahn gave the cottage because he had been long a government servant—on a pension."

"Over-voiced!" questioned his brother, lifting his finger and pointing to the tall shaft of the Skerry lighthouse, for the moment touched rose marble by the setting sun.

"I do not know. How should I know?" snapped his brother. "I heard Kahn say old Finnan had a daughter, but I don't believe I ever set eyes on the girl before!"

"Hum," thought his brother, "if it were not for what Jacob wrote me—well, never mind, it's certainly none of my business. I have heard Kahn say old Finnan had a daughter, but I don't believe I ever set eyes on the girl before!"

some air to breathe the night, along the working faces, since Vic Morris is going down!"

At that moment the doctor's brother came out, talking rapidly to his second-in-command.

"Nothing of the sort, Kahn," he was saying. "That won't do for me. I conduct my business openly. Nothing useless, of course, but a second eye must have. Besides, the government demands it—"

"And never looks for it—they will pass any ten-foot hole in the ground!" laughed Kahn; "but I will see to the matter immediately, sir. I admit that No. 2 pit is far from safe, and we have some costly plan down there—"

"Besides some few men?" said Mr. Jacob Romer, sternly.

"One hundred and four, sir," said Kahn, promptly. "But you can leave all that to me. The pumping engine at the bottom wants new connections, at any rate! We can make one job of the two!"

The master of the Incubus pits said something which his brother did not catch.

"Oh, yes, sir," said James Kahn, "a most respectable girl, indeed—excellent daughter, and all that, I believe. We been doin' old Finnan's inquests of ways in No. 2—a very steady old fellow, lighthouse keeper for many years, always to be depended upon. No, sir; I do not think you could find a better ten-foot hole in the ground."

He associated himself with United States Senator C. D. Clarke, of that State, the title was cleared, and pumps started to lift the water from the shafts. For eighty days they poured out the water, until the mine was dry, and then they uncovered such a wealth of gold that once again it was proven that in very truth Midas had lent his touch to this Delaware.

With his usual good luck, while he was in Wyoming, he heard of the Miners' Delight, a gold mine which had been filled with water since 1872, although in the early days the Shoshone Indians took much of the water for their use. The Delight had been forgotten by most Wyoming people, and those who remembered it regarded it as a dead proposition, not to be resurrected by any one, excepting those who had money to throw away.

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# THE MIDDLE TOE OF THE RIGHT FOOT

By AMBROSE BIERCE

FROM "IN THE MIDST OF LIFE-TALES OF SOLDIERS AND CIVILIANS."

## CHAPTER I.

It is well known that the old Manton house is haunted. In all the rural district near about, and even in the town of Marshall, a mile away, not one person of unbiased mind entertains a doubt of it; incredulity is confined to those opinionated people who will be called "cranks," as soon as the useful word shall have penetrated the intellectual demense of the Marshall Advance. The evidence that the house is haunted is of two kinds; the testimony of disinterested witnesses who have had ocular proof, and that of the house itself. The former may be disregarded and ruled out on any of the various grounds of objection which may be urged against it by the incredulous; but facts within the observation of all are material and controlling.

In the first place, the Manton house has been unoccupied by mortals for more than ten years, and with its outbuildings is slowly falling into decay—a circumstance which in itself the judicious will hardly venture to ignore. It stands a little way off the lonely reach of the Marshall and Harrison road, in an opening which was once a farm and is still disfigured with strips of rotting fence and half covered with brambles overrunning a stony and sterile soil long unacquainted with the plow. The house itself is in tolerably good condition, though badly weather-stained and in dire need of attention from the glazier, the smaller male population of the region having attested in the manner of its kind its disapproval of dwellings without dwellers. The house is two stories in height, nearly square, its front pierced by a single doorway flanked on each side by a window boarded up to the very top. Corresponding windows above, not protected, serve to admit light and rain to the rooms of the upper floor.

Grass and weeds grow pretty rankly all about, and the few shade trees, somewhat the worse for wind and leaning all in one direction, seem to be making a concerted effort to run away. In short, as the Marshall town humorist explained in the columns of the Advance, "the proposition that the Manton house is badly haunted is the only logical conclusion from the premises." The fact that in this dwelling Mr. Manton thought it expedient one night some ten years ago to rise and cut the throats of his wife and two small children, removing at once to another part of the country, has no doubt done its share in directing public attention to the fitness of the place for supernatural phenomena.

To this house, one summer evening, came four men in a wagon. Three of them promptly alighted, and the one who had been driving hitched the team to the only remaining post of what had been a fence. The fourth remained seated in the wagon. "Come," said one of his companions, approaching him, while the others moved away in the direction of the dwellings—"this is the place."

The man addressed was pale and trembling, and he was working out of his mind. "By God," he said harshly, "this is a trick, and it looks to me as if you were in it."

"Perhaps I am," the other said, looking him straight in the face and speaking in a tone which had something of contempt in it. "You will remember, however, that the choice of place was, with your own assent, left to the other side. Of course if you are afraid of spooks—"

"I am afraid of nothing," the man interrupted with another oath, and sprang to the ground. The two then joined the others at the door, and one of them already opened with some difficulty, caused by rust of lock and hinge. All entered. Inside it was dark, but the man who had unlocked the door produced a candle and matches and made a light. He then unlocked a door on their right as they stood in the passage. This gave them entrance to a large, square room, which the candle but dimly lighted. The floor had a thick carpeting of dust, which partly muffled their footsteps. Cobwebs were in the angles of the walls and depended from the ceiling like strips of rotting lace. The furniture consisted of a bed in the disordered state. The room had two windows in adjoining walls, but from neither could anything be seen except the rough inner surfaces of boards a few inches from the glass. There was no fireplace, no furniture; there was nothing but the cobwebs and the dust, the four men were the only objects there which were not a part of the structure.

Strange enough they looked in the yellow light of the candle. The one who had so reluctantly alighted was especially "spectacular," as the new slang had been called sensational. He was of middle age, heavily built, deep chested, and broad shouldered. Looking at his figure, one would have said that he had a giant's strength, and that he would use it like a giant. He was clean shaven, his hair rather closely cropped and gray. His low forehead was seamed with wrinkles above the eyes, and over his nose there became vertical. The heavy black brows followed the same law, saved from meeting only by an upward turn at what would otherwise have been the point of contact. Deeply sunken beneath these, glowed in the obscure light a pair of eyes of a peculiar color, but obviously enough, too small. There was something forbidding in their expression, which was not bettered by the cruel mouth and wide jaw. The nose was well enough, as noses go, but not to expect much of noses. All that was sinister in the man's face seemed accentuated by an unnatural pallor—he appeared altogether bloodless.

The appearance of the other men was sufficiently commonplace; they were such persons as one meets and forgets that he met. All were younger than the man described, between whom and the eldest of the others, who stood apart, there was apparently no kinship. They avoided looking at each other.

"Gentlemen," said the man holding the candle and keys, "I believe everything is right. Are you ready, Mr. Rosser?"

The man standing apart from the group bowed and smiled.

"And you, Mr. Grossmith?"

The heavy man bowed and scowled.

"You will please remove your outer clothing."

Their hats, coats, waistcoats, and neckwear were soon removed and thrown outside the door, in the passage. The man with the candle now nodded, and the other three, who had already been disrobed, followed him into the room. The man who had unlocked the door produced a pocket of his overcoat two long, murderous-looking Bowie knives which he drew from the scabbards.

"They are exactly alike," he said, presenting one to each of the two principals—for by this time the dull observer would have understood the nature of this meeting. It was to be a duel to the death.

smith," said the man holding the light, "you will place yourself in that corner." He indicated the angle of the room farthest from the door, whither Grossmith retired, his second placing him with a grasp of the hand which had nothing of cordiality in it. In the angle nearest the door Mr. Rosser stationed himself, and after a whispered conference, his second left him joining the other near the door. At that moment the candle was suddenly extinguished, leaving all in profound darkness. This may have been done by a draught from the opened door, whatever the cause, the effect was startling.

"Gentlemen," said a voice which sounded strangely unfamiliar in the altered condition affecting the relations of the senses—"gentlemen, you will not move until you hear the closing of the outer door."

A sound of tramping ensued, then the closing of the inner door; and finally the outer one closed with a concussion which shook the floor boards.

A few minutes after a belated farmer's boy met a light wagon which was being driven furiously toward the town of Marshall. He declared that behind the two figures on the front seat, and a third, with its hands upon the bowed shoulders of the others, who appeared to struggle vainly to free themselves from his grasp. This figure, unlike the others, was clad in white, and had undoubtedly boarded the wagon as it passed the haunted house. As the lad could boast of considerable former experience with the supernatural, his word had the super-natural thereabout, his word had the weight justly due to the testimony of an expert. The story eventually appeared in the Advance, with some slight literary embellishments and a concluding intimation that the gentlemen referred to would be allowed the use of the paper's columns for their version of the night's adventure. But the privilege remained without a claimant.

## CHAPTER II.

The events which led up to this "duel in the dark" were simple enough. One evening three young men of the town of Marshall were sitting in a quiet corner of the porch of the village hotel, smoking and discussing such matters as three educated young men of a Southern village would naturally find interesting. Their names were King, Sancher, and Rosser. At a little distance, within easy hearing, but taking no part in the conversation, sat a fourth. He was a stranger to the others. They merely knew that on his arrival by the stage coach the night before, he had written in the hotel register the name of Robert Grossmith. He had not been observed to speak to any one except the hotel clerk. He seemed, indeed, singularly fond of his own company—or, as the personnel of the Advance expressed it, "grossly addicted to evil associations." But then it should be said in justice to the stranger that the personnel was himself of a too convivial disposition fairly to judge one differently gifted, and had, moreover, experienced a slight rebuff in an effort at an "interview."

"I hate any kind of deformity in a woman," said King, "whether natural or—"

"or acquired. I have a theory that any physical defect has its correlative mental and moral defect."

"I infer, then," said Rosser, gravely, "that a lady lacking the advantage of a nose would find the struggle to become Mrs. King an arduous enterprise."

"Of course, you may put it that way," was the reply; "but, seriously, I once threw over a most charming girl on learning, quite accidentally, that she had suffered amputation of a toe. My conduct was brutal, if you like, but if I had married that girl, I should have been miserable and should have made her so."

"Whereas," said Sancher, with a light laugh, "by marrying a gentleman of more liberal views she escaped with a parted throat."

"Ah, you know to whom I refer! Yes, she married Manton, but I don't know about his liberality; I'm not sure but he cut her throat because he discovered that she lacked that excellent thing in woman, the middle toe of the right foot."

"Look at that chap!" said Rosser, in a low voice, his eyes fixed upon the stranger.

"That chap was obviously listening intently to the conversation."

"Damn his impudence!" muttered King; "what counts he to eavesdrop?"

"That's an easy one," Rosser replied, rising. "Sir," he continued, addressing the stranger, "I think it would be better if you would remove your chair to the other end of the veranda. The presence of gentlemen is evidently an unfamiliar situation to you."

The man sprang to his feet and strode forward with clenched hands, his face white with rage. He now had King, Sancher stepped between the belligerents.

"You are hasty and unjust," he said to Rosser; "this gentleman has done nothing to deserve such language."

"But you won't do a word for a word. By the custom of the country and the time, there could be but one outcome to the quarrel."

"I demand the satisfaction due to a gentleman," said the stranger, who had become more calm. "I have not a acquaintance in this region. Perhaps you, sir," bowing to Sancher, "will be kind enough to represent me in this matter."

Sancher accepted the trust—somewhat reluctantly, it must be confessed, for the man's appearance and manner were not at all to his liking. King, who, during the colloquy, had hardly removed his eyes from the stranger's face, and had not spoken a word, now came forward to act for Rosser, and the upshot of it was that, the principals having retired, a meeting was arranged for the next evening. The nature of the arrangements has been already described, and the scene which unfolded in a dark room was once a common feature of Southwestern life. It is likely to be again. How thin a veneering of "civility" covered the essential brutality of the code under which such encounters were possible, we shall see.

## CHAPTER III.

In the blaze of a midsummer noonday, the old Manton house was hardly true to its traditions. It was of the earth, earthly. The sunshine caressed it warmly and affectionately, with evident unconsciousness of its bad reputation. The grass, green as the expanse in its front, seemed to grow, not rankly, but with a natural and joyous exuberance, and the weeds blossomed quite like plants. Full of charming light and shadows, and populous with pleasant-sounding birds, the neglected shade trees no longer struggled to run away, but bent reverently beneath their burdens of sun and song. Even in the glassless upper windows was an expression of peace and contentment, due to the light within. Over the stony fields the visible hand danced with a lively tremor incompatible with the gravity which is an attribute of the supernatural.

Such was the aspect under which the place presented itself to Sheriff Adams one afternoon in the late summer of 1907, when from Marshall to look at it. One of these

men was Mr. King, the sheriff's deputy; the other, whose name was Brewer, was a brother of the late Mrs. Manton. Under a beneficent law of the State relating to property which has been for a certain period abandoned by its owner whose residence cannot be ascertained, the sheriff and his appointees are permitted to take possession of the Manton farm and its appurtenances—merely to long. His present visit was in mere perfunctory compliance with some order of a court in which Mr. Brewer had an action to get possession of the property as heir to his deceased sister. By a mere coincidence the visit was made on the day after the night that Deputy King had unlocked the house for another and very different purpose. His presence now was not of his own choosing; he had been ordered to accompany his superior, and at the moment could think of nothing more prudent than simulated alacrity in obedience.

Carelessly opening the front door, which to his surprise was not locked, the sheriff was amazed to see, lying on the floor of the passage into which it opened, a confused heap of men's apparel. Examination showed it to consist of two hats and the